

## Ep. 108 | Once Upon an Eid and The Girl and the Ghost

[00:00:11] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here with Sumaiyya Naseem. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, we're talking about our discussion picks ONCE UPON AN EID and THE GIRL AND THE GHOST.

[00:00:26] **Sumaiyya** You can find a complete transcript of this episode on our website, [readingwomenpodcast.com](http://readingwomenpodcast.com). And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:36] **Kendra** Well, we have been talking about these two books for a while already, so I'm finally glad to hit the record button because we adored both of these books and are very, very excited to talk about them.

[00:00:49] **Sumaiyya** There's so much to discuss. They are such wonderful books and absolute five-star reads for both of us. So, always exciting to look forward to that.

[00:01:00] **Kendra** Yes. Yes. And I just fell in love with both of them. So there's so much to talk about in both of them. But before we jump into that, I did want to give some updates. So we have a Patreon, as many of you may know. But our wonderful contributor, RuthAnn, is one of the most hard-working, behind-the-scenes people that we have on our team. And she does a magnificent job of helping us coordinate newsletter stuff and posts and all sorts of things. She's like a wizard with Google forms. I don't even know how, but she's wonderful. And she also writes our Patreon newsletter. And every month, she will do something different, which I really love. And sometimes she'll expand on the current theme or a different theme during that month. So, for example, I think she talked about poetry one time for poetry month or something similar. I just really love the way that she just creatively, you know, goes about and recommends books and audiobooks and shows photos of her Westie, Ted, which is also great.

[00:02:08] **Sumaiyya** We love the fur babies in our team. They also contribute so much.

[00:02:15] **Kendra** They do. They do. We love all of their photos. And I really love the work that RuthAnn does. And I really love the newsletters that she puts out. So definitely check that out. Other things we have on our Patreon are our Patreon podcast episodes. We also have a book club. At first quarter, we talked about DEATH BY DUMPLING. And we're currently voting for our quarter two pick. And I am just really excited. I love talking about these books. And I've been hyping them up a bit more. Very excited to read with all of our wonderful patrons. So, yeah. And thanks to you all patrons. If you're listening, we love you. You make this happen. So thanks so much for that. All right. So that's it for our updates for this episode. Sumaiyya, you have our first discussion pick.

[00:03:07] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, so my selection for our discussion is ONCE UPON AN EID, which is this beautiful anthology edited by S. K. Ali and Aisha Saeed. And they've put together this incredible work that features thirteen other voices alongside them. And I'm in love with this book. It's basically all about Eid, which is a Muslim celebration each year. And, you know, it's filled with this gorgeous descriptions of food and family gatherings and traditions. So it's just this fluffy feel-good book. If you read it, it's going to guarantee that you'll finish it feeling really happy. There may be some tears.

[00:03:51] **Sumaiyya** But also like, I'm just in love with the range of voices in this collection. And that's the great thing about anthologies. Right? Like, you get so many different kinds of experiences in one book. And you also get to discover so many authors. So what I absolutely love is the way that it depicts the range of Muslim experiences: different cultures, different regions of the world. So you have Asian Muslims; you have Black Muslims, and even Shia and Sunni Muslims, and Muslims from the Middle East. So it's really beautiful and depicts this great collection of people and their experiences with Eid. And another thing that's absolutely wonderful about this book is that you don't have to be Muslim to read and enjoy it. So that's ONCE UPON AN EID.

[00:04:39] **Kendra** Yes, I absolutely adored this book. And one of the things I really loved about it is, you know, in their introduction, they mention that . . . you know . . . they give you a little intro. So for children who are reading this, who may not be Muslim, they understand what Eid is. And they mention that, having over two billion Muslims around the world, that Eid is celebrated in a lot of different ways. And each story is so different, but all contain those universal themes of family and festivity and the joy of celebrating together. And it doesn't matter where they are in the world or what they're going through. There is that unique magic of a kind of holiday. And that's why I love that this is a perfect pick for Middle Grade Magic because there's that festivity in each and every one of these stories.

[00:05:28] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And, you know, just to quickly recap, in case any of our listeners are not really aware of what Ramadan and Eid are. . . . So Ramadan is this month of fasting. And then Eid is actually the feast that comes right after the end of Ramadan. So there is actually this passage in one of those stories that we'll be discussing today. But I actually quickly want to go to that first. It's from "Searching for Blue" by N. H. Senzai. And there's this lovely passage, perfectly explains what Ramadan and Eid are. And I'm going to quickly read that for you. "A deep rumbling in his stomach soon interrupted Baseem's bleak thoughts. Hunger was a familiar sensation, developed over years of living in a war zone. But for the past month, the hunger had been in observance of Ramadan. He sighed. Babba had loved the holy month of Ramadan, when you abstained from dawn to dusk not only from food and drink, but also from negative thoughts and actions. It was a time of reflection, personal improvement, and increased devotion to God. It was also a month of charity. And Babba had always made sure they'd shared their blessings with others less fortunate than they were." So I think that that description just perfectly describes what Ramadan and Eid are basically in essence. Yeah.

[00:06:48] **Kendra** And I think it's such a great thing for children to kind of dwell on that idea, a spiritual reflection and how these moments are to examine your relationship with God and focus on spiritual things. But also there is festivities that go along with that. They kind of walk hand-in-hand. And so I really love how that's packaged in this wonderful short-story collection that they can see that. And I, as a non-Muslim person, learned so much about Ramadan and celebrations through this. There's this story called "Gifts," and there's this obnoxious brother who's always quoting the Quran to his little brother, like, you have to do this, that, and the next thing. It's really just like, oh, I've met an older brother like that somewhere. You know? Like, I feel like there's so many universals, but also educational, particularly if you have a child in your life who is a Muslim who wants to learn more about it. So it's just. . . . I love it.

[00:07:47] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. I actually really loved "Gifts." And that's the story by Rukhsana. That's the one you were referring to, right?

[00:07:52] **Kendra** Mm hmm.

[00:07:54] **Sumaiyya** And yeah, I really loved the way that it actually, you know, gives you this lesson that gifts are actually not about what you're actually giving to the person, but just about the emotions behind it and the love that you feel for the person. And, you know, another story that I really loved for the message that it sends is "The Feast of Sacrifice" by Hena Khan. She is one of our favorite writers for good reason. And her story was absolutely perfect because in the end, like eventually, like this story is about these siblings who are celebrating Eid with their grandparents. It's Eid al-Adha which is the other Eid that we have in the year. And they are with their grandparents. And they feel like it's not as exciting as celebrating with their parents. Their parents are away for Hajj. And so this story was just so adorable because it kind of teaches them that, you know, they should not be selfish and kind of like actually celebrate together as a community and be happy with the celebration that they do get and learn to adapt. So that was also a really beautiful one.

[00:08:59] **Kendra** Yeah, yeah. And that one, you know, we've already mentioned food. But that one also had lots of great food in it. And each one does because I feel like food is definitely part of celebrating, especially with Ramadan where you're fasting, and you're really like thinking about your body and different things like that, and you break your fast at the end of the day. And I . . . honestly, the only criticism I have is that there wasn't like a cookbook that kind of went along with it or was a piece at the end of each story because I was like, I want to eat that. It's so great the way that they tie that in. And each of the stories takes actually those principles and kind of takes a different look at it, whether that be gift giving or celebrating with your family. And it's funny because whenever I think about each of the stories, I actually think of the recipes or a food that was discussed in each of them. So, yeah, we could probably talk about the food forever. But.

[00:09:58] **Sumaiyya** Yeah! And, you know, like "Eid" literally means "feast" in Arabic. So the whole idea of celebrating Eid is that after this, you know, one long month of fasting and refraining from, you know, indulgence, you basically get this reward that is Eid, where you can indulge as much as you want—and obviously not as much as you want—but have fun with your family and feast and have a good time together. It's a celebration of the month that had just passed. So that's really the most beautiful thing. And you know, like you mentioned, the food that's present in every story, I love it too because we're seeing different cultural foods. And that is always interesting to learn about and also to see how within the religion of Islam you have so many different cultures that actually have their own traditions. And even individually, families have their own traditions. So, yeah, that's one of my favorite aspects of this book is the way it depicts that. So you mentioned that you really loved the food in this anthology. What's a story that you absolutely loved?

[00:11:06] **Kendra** So my favorite story, if that is possible in such a collection, would be the story by Huda Al-Marashi. "Not Only an Only." This story is about a young girl named Aya. And she lives in, I believe, California in a town that does not have any other Muslim families. And so she is a Shia Muslim that is living in kind of isolation. And there were other Muslims there, but they were not Shia. And they told her that, you know, her family. . . . They said things to her family, that they weren't real Muslims. And so they're talking about this in class. And her class is asking her all sorts of intrusive questions. And then another Muslim girl arrives. And she is like immediately, you know, pairing up. And she realizes that her new friend, Hana, is not a Shia Muslim either. And she's worried that, you know, there might be some judgment. But ultimately it goes down like, we're all Muslims. And I really appreciated that because it looked at, you know, two girls from two different sects of Islam and just how there's that unity there that, yeah, they might practice their faith differently, but we're all Muslim. And at the end, the Eid celebration, you know, Aya has

spent a lot of her time just celebrating Eid with just her family because they didn't feel welcome. But then they went to this festival. And it was like. . . . It was kind of how being with other Muslims, she said, was able to celebrate Eid in a way that she never had before. It dealt with such a, I guess, deep connection with her faith in this story and her connection with other Muslims. And I just really appreciated that, you know, it's a very complicated topic. But I feel like Al-Marashi does a great job of talking about these really difficult topics of different sects and how it affects children and just going down to the fundamentals that, you know, we're all Muslims. And I just love the way that she was able to do that.

[00:13:10] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I think it's actually one of the most important stories that unifies, you know, different Muslims rather than focusing on the differences that exist. I think it's so important to remember that we're Muslim first. And that is, you know, absolutely the most important thing. And these divisions are often created by people who are just following what they were told in the past. And I like that younger Muslims now are more aware and that we are actually getting a story where these young Muslims understand that there is no difference and that, you know, they're both just Muslim. And it's better to be united together rather than divided amongst your own community because what that does is that unity gives them a strong front at school where they're the only Muslims. So it was a really beautiful story. And I'm so happy that it's a part of this collection. And, you know, Huda really beautifully about Aya's experience and her family's experience. And it's just really nice to see that they do eventually find a community where they're accepted and embraced in the way that they should be.

[00:14:17] **Kendra** And I think, you know, for young children, it's really difficult to learn that people in your own faith can be really hurtful to you and cause, you know, it can often affect your relationship in your faith with God when people in your own religion are very hurtful to you personally. And that's really hard to learn as a kid. And so I think that's also something that's tackled in this book because, you know, there's forgiveness that has to happen on Aya's part and understanding that, like, forgiving and being open to having more relationships with other Muslims in the future. And that's something that I haven't really seen tackled in a middle grade book before like this. And it's just really well done and really insightful on the author's part.

[00:15:03] **Sumaiyya** Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. And, you know, just to add to what you said because you've just explained it brilliantly, just the thing is, you know, sometimes adults in our own lives maybe don't know better. And we understand things in a way that they don't. And this story also captures a bit of that because the adults in the community are the ones who are pushing the family aside when they really shouldn't be doing that. So it's really nice to see a story that addresses these issues because these are pertinent issues in our Muslim community. And it's really nice to see a joyful book address it in a way that strengthens the Muslim community rather than causing more divides.

[00:15:44] **Kendra** So what was one of your favorite stories, Sumaiyya, if that's possible?

[00:15:49] **Sumaiyya** It was so difficult to select just one. But I went for one of the most joyful stories in this collection, which is "Yusuf and the Great Big Brownie Mistake." I loved this story so much. First of all, it's about this young kid, a little boy who wants to bake brownies for Eid because that's their family tradition. And he's a bit annoyed because his sister has other ideas. And, you know, I love the way that this story is about the importance of traditions and the way that we form our traditions and how they can also sometimes change and evolve.

[00:16:26] **Kendra** Yeah, yeah, I love that too because it's like this special thing that they have. And I was always, you know, I'm always more of a traditional person and wanting to celebrate things in a certain way. And I'm like, I connect with you, kid. Like, I mean, I see you. And it's just such a delightful story of mishap. And it's really funny.

[00:16:48] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, it's really cute because, first of all, you know that he loves Eid. Like, he is so excited about it. And that's what Eid is, like it's all about the kids. And you can tell that he wants to kind of get that same feeling of excitement and joy that he gets each year. So he's trying to recreate that. And for him, the outlet for that is the brownies. And when he sees that his sister has other ideas, that kind of unsettles him because he thinks that, oh my god, is she going to change things this year? Like, is Eid going to be the same way? And the beautiful lesson that we see in this book, in the story is, you know, the brownies. . . . There is a little blunder that happens because the poor kid, you know, he wanted Eid's day to smell like brownies. He wanted it to be fresh out of the oven. But then he gets distracted by video games. There's all of that happening. But I loved seeing the way that that small mishap is kind of fixed by the entire family, how everyone pitches in to kind of fix the brownie. That was really beautifully done. And I honestly wish that this story could be longer.

[00:18:01] **Kendra** Yeah. You know, each one of these stories actually made me start Googling them and try to find their other work as well. And that's definitely one where I was like, oh, this is this is adorable. And I think especially like younger readers will connect with that. Like, I know this is an age range of eight to twelve. People closer on the eight-side of the age range will connect with that and how it's written.

[00:18:22] **Sumaiyya** It's really beautifully done. And, you know, towards the end of the story, when they've saved the brownies, they kind of realize that, "Okay, next year we can have these brownies, and we can also have the blueberry tarts" that his sister made because they're also delicious. So it's like, okay, you can, you know, add things to your traditions and kind of . . . it doesn't have to be exactly what it is every year. But it's all about family being together and celebrating together. And it's all about the delicious food.

[00:18:47] **Kendra** Yes. You know, a story that we both really loved is "Searching for Blue." And that was on both of our lists as one of our favorites.

[00:18:56] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, the writing was one of the best. Out of like—if I had to rank them, which would again be like this whole other difficult process, like it's . . . it would be so difficult—but "Searching for Blue" by N. H. Senzai, like this one would be at the very top because it was just so beautifully done. And also I don't think that this is exactly a middle grade story. I think it leans more towards YA because I get the sense that our protagonist Bassem is a bit older. I adored this because it was mature, and it had like so many different layers. The way that it begins, you get a proper sense of Bassem and all the hardship that he's gone through, the family that he's lost because of the war in Syria. And, you know, he's a refugee in Greece. So it's really about this, you know, this time of difficulty, like this great period of difficulty that he is facing. And his faith is at a low point. And I think the story is really looking at the way that, you know, celebrating Eid as a community and just the wonderful way in which everyone comes together to maintain that joy that Eid always is supposed to have, you know, in this difficult situation, in this small refugee community, in all of that, in all of that hope, in all of that joy, we kind of see the shifts in his faith. And I thought that that was really beautifully done.

[00:20:24] **Kendra** Yeah, I definitely felt it was on the older end of the spectrum as well. And because it deals with a more poignant moment where Bassem is really struggling with his faith after so many horrible things have happened to him. And, you know, he's lost his father. And he's having to celebrate Eid without members of his family and just trying to process all of that in the context of his own faith. And this is an important point for him that celebrating Eid, it's kind of like trying to keep the family together and keep that spirit alive and represents kind of keeping his faith alive as well in the face of such adversity. And I almost cried at the end of that story. That was. . . .

[00:21:03] **Sumaiyya** I did cry. I definitely cried at the end because to me, it was just such a heart-wrenching story, you know, about this young boy who has his whole life ahead of him. But it doesn't feel like that, right, because of all of the people that he's lost. But it's that small cookie cutter that his mom is holding—you know, the one that makes Ma'amoul—that kind of pulls him back towards the hope that exists in life. And I really love this one thing that his father says to him, which is, "Habibi, always look beyond what your eyes initially recognize and find out what is real, what is possible, and what is the truth." I loved it because it is true that, you know, when we are facing difficulties, that it's easy to kind of forget that there is, you know, hope in the future that we are promised in Islam, like God promises us ease after difficulty. So sometimes when we are in the midst of the difficulty, it's easy to forget. But I really love the turning in his faith in the story. And it was just so beautifully done. And, yeah, it just filled me with so much hope at the end, when we get a happy ending, which, you know, they obviously truly deserve. And you know, one other reason I appreciated that the story was part of the anthology is that it balances the other narratives and, you know, shows us a different type of Eid, which is also a very valid and very real experience of Eid. So those were two of the stories that we absolutely adored. Both of us like felt so joyful after reading them and so emotional as well.

[00:22:44] **Sumaiyya** A couple of other narratives that I quickly wanted to highlight is a "Seraj Captures the Moon" by G. Willow Wilson. This is a short graphic novel that is in this book, and it's illustrated by Sara Alfageeh. This is such an adorable story. It's very imaginative, very cute. And it's basically about, you know, it's basically an imaginative take on the sighting of the crescent moon, which is basically what signals the start of Eid. So I really loved it. And I wished it was longer. Kendra, what were your thoughts on this one?

[00:23:23] **Kendra** I thought it was really adorable. And I wished it was longer as well. But I think the illustrator just shines in this one in particular since much of the story rides on her illustrations.

[00:23:34] **Sumaiyya** Yeah.

[00:23:34] **Kendra** And so, at the beginning of each chapter in the book, there's an illustration of the characters. And then I was so delighted, because I loved her illustrations, to see that she had also illustrated the little short story in graphic novel form. And I'm a huge fan of G. Willow Wilson, obviously, because Kamala Khan, I will stan forever. And so I loved it.

[00:23:57] **Sumaiyya** And you mentioned the illustrations that accompany each of the chapters. We have another narrative in this book is "Eid Pictures" by Jamila Thompkins-Bigelow. And this actually is accompanied by a collage of different pictures and newspaper cuttings. It is so beautiful. And this narrative is actually a poem. It is really beautifully written. And it describes the different, you know, types of Eid photos, different kinds of clothes that people wear on Eid. So it's really a celebration of the diversity of culture during

Eid and in the Muslim community. And this poem is essentially, you know, by the time you reach the ending, it's essentially a . . . it's an ode to Black Muslims who were brought to America and enslaved and forced to abandon their religious practices.

[00:24:50] **Sumaiyya** So I quickly wanted to actually read this, if we have a bit of time, just the final passage in this poem, the final stanza in this poem. It reads, "Picture those Muslims in fields looking out, holding tight to memories of the past, reaching out to visions of the future. Did they foresee Eids bold and gentle, Eids loud and loving? Did they see their descendants? See you and me? Did they see us all someday free? I can almost hear their whispered wishes to us spoken in the fields each Eid. Say Amen to those prayers, all our voices as one." It was so beautiful and so emotional to read this poem.

[00:25:27] **Kendra** There's so much talent in one anthology.

[00:25:30] **Sumaiyya** Yeah.

[00:25:31] **Kendra** I mean, I feel like we could talk about this for ages. But you all will just have to go pick it up yourself and read or listen to a copy. And whatever route you choose, it is wonderful.

[00:25:46] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And I think the audiobook will also give you instructions to where you can see the graphic novel. So you're not going to miss out on that if you listen to the audio. All right. So that was our discussion pick—well, my discussion pick, ONCE UPON AN EID, which is edited by S. K. Ali and Aisha Saeed, published by Amulet Books.

[00:26:09] **Sumaiyya** So, Kendra, tell us about your discussion pick.

[00:26:13] **Kendra** So one of the contributors in ONCE UPON AN EID is actually Hanna Alkaf, and that is the author of my discussion pick. She is from Malaysia, which is wonderful because we wanted to feature more international writers this year. And so when I found this book, THE GIRL AND THE GHOST, I was delighted. And I started reading it. And I just was blown away by this story. And just a short recap, this is about Suraya and the pelesit that she has inherited from her grandmother, which is a kind of spirit or ghost, as it says in the title. She discovers. . . . You know, she doesn't remember a time without Pink, her pelesit. And so he is her best friend, and she grows up with him. And she just has this deep connection with him. She feels very lonely. Her mom is a bit distant. But when she goes to a new school, she experiences a lot of bullying because she's from a poorer part of the community. And she had a lot of mean girls there, my stars. And so she's wonderfully delighted, though, when she meets a girl named Jing. And they really become best friends. And Pink, her pelesit, though, becomes jealous. And bad things start happening to Jing. And obviously Suraya is not pleased. And so that's really like the conflict that kind of starts the plot of the novel.

[00:27:42] **Sumaiyya** That is so fascinating. I absolutely loved this book when I read it last year. And you're right. You know, the interesting thing about Suraya and Pink is that they're actually like best friends, but also they're each other's worst enemy because, you know, Suraya doesn't want to give Pink the orders. And, you know, she doesn't really want to order him around. She doesn't want to fulfill the role that she thought he was kind of forced upon her, to be honest. And also, you know, he wants to be her only friend. So that causes a lot of the tensions in their lives.

[00:28:17] **Kendra** And Jing is so wonderful. I loved her as a character. She's obsessed with Star Wars. And the narrator in particular captured a certain cadence that the dialogue was written in, which I loved. And she kind of performs Jing's character in such a delightful way. And so I could just see her in my head like, you know, and she always has all these Star Wars references. And that's how she interprets life, is "oh, yeah, that's like this part in Star Wars." And I'm like, I relate. You know. That's definitely something that I think a lot of the time. And so there's this one moment, like I mentioned last time, where they're trying to figure out kind of like where Pink came from. And Jing's like, Oh! Like his origin story! Like when Luke had to find out where Darth Vader came from, and when he figured out he was actually his father—sorry if that's a spoiler, but if you haven't watched Star Wars yet, you probably should—that's when it all became better. And, like, he understood things! And I was like, I relate. I mean, I was like that with The Lord of the Rings. Let's just be honest. Like, that's my touchstone. But I really loved her.

[00:29:29] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. She was such a delight. And honestly, just for that audio, just for that performance by the narrator, I would recommend listening to the audiobook because it just brings so much to the page. And she is such a sweet character. And I felt so happy when she entered Suraya's life. I felt like, finally! You know, Suraya needed a really healthy friendship because—let's be honest—Pink is not the most healthy friend to have. And I appreciated the way that actually Suraya gets to experience, you know, like in the course of the story, she gets familiar with both a healthy relationship with a friend and also a toxic relationship. And I think that really, really adds to her personal growth and journey as a young girl and just in general as a character as well. Since it's a middle grade book, I think it's important for younger readers to also learn about these things through stories. So that was very well done, in my opinion.

[00:30:34] **Kendra** Yeah, yeah. I really appreciated that look at the friendship. And, you know, this book also deals with a lot of difficult topics that I feel like were handled in such an accessible way for middle grade readers. And so this book really looks at what a pelesit is. And this book is inspired by the cultural understanding of pelesits and ghosts and how they're connected with family and heritage and a lot of different discussions around those themes.

[00:31:06] **Kendra** And so, you know, the pelesit was inherited by Suraya from her grandmother, who created the pelesit. And they learn a bit more in their journey—and I won't give any spoilers—about how pelesits are made, et cetera, et cetera. But really, you know, a pelesit represents a lot of sadness and trauma that Suraya's family has experienced and how different generations of that family then carry that grief with them. And it's very much, you know, Pink is a physical manifestation . . . or not physical manifestation . . . of that grief. And I had never seen that written in such an accessible way for children because that's something that they experience a lot. And they don't understand what it is until they're much older. And I think this is a way to start conversations about that, especially if something difficult has happened in your family. And, you know, we find out at the very beginning, Suraya's father has already passed away. And her mother is very sad from that. And she carries a lot of that with her.

[00:32:11] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, and I absolutely agree because Suraya's life at home is quite difficult because of how distant her mother is. And there is a point towards the end of the story—I don't think this is really going to be a spoiler—but she says to her mother, you know, like basically she's telling her mom, hadn't you realized that, you know, broken mothers raise broken daughters? Did you not see how we could have each filled the parts the other was missing and been stronger together? So this is something she says to her

mother. And, you know, it was just absolutely beautiful in the way that, by the end of the story, they're all healing in these small ways and dealing with the grief and coming to terms with the loss, you know, that they've experienced. And it was really important for me to kind of see some growth on Suraya's mother's part because she is absent in her life, you know, to a great extent.

[00:33:10] **Kendra** Yeah. And that's part of the journey of this novel, is figuring out the origin story of Pink and how that affected Suraya's family and why he is an inherited spirit. And I think that's really a key point because it really makes that connection between her grandmother, her mother, and herself, and the women in this family that inherit this particular spirit. And I think, Sumaiyya, you were saying something earlier when we were chatting before we recorded about how the spirit is inherited by the women in the family in particular.

[00:33:45] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I think that . . . what was that. . . . It was, yeah! So what I'd read about the pelesit is that it's actually gender specific and that it goes from female to female in the family line. So it's inherited by the female relatives. And there are other ghosts or spirits in Malaysian folklore or in Malay folklore, as they call it, that are actually specific to the male gender. And I'm really curious about the way that Hanna Alkaf is going to write in the future. And I really hope that this could maybe become a series of books where we see different ghosts and spirits and the way that they are interacting with kids or, you know, kids who basically have these run-ins with the ghost. That would be very fascinating. And I'd definitely love to read that.

[00:34:37] **Kendra** You know, there are a lot of graveyards in this book and lots of, like, spooky things. But I felt like it was never too scary, and it had that perfect balance that a middle grade novel, you know, needs to hit when you talk about difficult things and have ghosts and whatnot. So I felt like, I mean, it's gotten so many great reviews and accolades here in the US and for so many reasons. And I think, you know, a lot of people think that writing children's books is super easy. It's super not. It's very difficult. And I was just, you know, the craft of this book is amazing. And that's something that I . . . It's so good.

[00:35:20] **Sumaiyya** It's phenomenal.

[00:35:22] **Kendra** And it's not just a book that I enjoyed the adventure. The craft and the difficulty level of writing this middle grade book is really high. And so I was so impressed with the way that the author maneuvered and crafted this book as a piece of literature, of children's literature. And it's something that I am going to treasure as one of, you know, it's one of the best middle grade novels I've read this year. And as we talked about earlier, I've read a lot. So I feel like that is a sign of this book. And I don't know. I feel like I could just sing its praises for ages because I just, you know, I about cried at the end of this book. Like, it was so moving. And I just sat there and hugged it and had a little book coma, you know, after.

[00:36:09] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. You know, I absolutely agree with everything that you've said, especially the way that Hanna Alkaf basically balances the adventure with the darker and spookier elements and also, like, brings in some light moments. And I think that Jing is basically a large part of that. She just brightens up the mood of the story. And, you know, when she comes in, she's a breath of fresh air. And I absolutely loved reading the way that she broached these difficult topics for children and made it heartfelt and made it so adventurous and, you know, just put together this excellent narrative that just works on so many different layers. Like you can actually sit and properly do a close reading of the book

and, you know, find many layers within it. So, yeah, I absolutely am in love with this book. And she has quickly become one of my favorite writers for sure.

[00:37:16] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah. I cannot wait to read her other book, which is a YA novel. What was that called? THE WEIGHT OF OUR SKY. And I actually own it because it's from Salaam Reads, which, you know, we love. So.

[00:37:28] **Sumaiyya** We adore Salaam Reads. They're our favorite.

[00:37:33] **Kendra** I mean, we could just sit here and gush about it. But instead, we highly encourage you to go actually listen or read the book, particularly like, you know, the audiobook because Jing is amazing. She's like her. . . .

[00:37:46] **Sumaiyya** She's a force of nature.

[00:37:48] **Kendra** She really is. She really is. And we all need a friend like Jing really, honestly.

[00:37:53] **Sumaiyya** We do. We really do. She validates all the nerdiness and, you know, like the fun and the sass that she brings to the story. I mean, I absolutely love her. What's not to love? Like, she is perfect. Oh, I actually had a question for you, Kendra.

[00:38:11] **Kendra** Oh yes, please.

[00:38:12] **Sumaiyya** Because honestly, like I don't have in—since I'm so in awe of this book, to be honest—but I was wondering, do you think that Suraya forgave Pink too easily for the psychological torture that he puts her through? Like this is one of the things that I wonder about. Do you think it's like that because she is a child? And, you know, children are innocent, and they're more forgiving people. Do you think that's the factor? Or do you think that, you know, he should have been punished a bit?

[00:38:44] **Kendra** I think it's both. So I think that she did forgive him easily, but I think that's because she's a child. But also, I think it kind of represents, you know, their grandmother and needing to forgive the grandmother because that's kind of representation. You know, he's a stand-in for the things that happened to Suraya's family. And I feel like the way that she forgave Pink was a way that her family needed to forgive her grandmother for various things. And I didn't really notice that until after the book ended. I was like, oh, okay. Because I had wondered that too. Like, dude, you actually broke whatever, sprained her arm? Broke her arm? Broke Jing's arm? Whatever it was.

[00:39:26] **Sumaiyya** Psychologically tortured her, literally. Like with horrible smells and hallucinations. Like, yeah.

[00:39:34] **Kendra** It was a lot.

[00:39:38] **Sumaiyya** I feel like he should have, you know, he should have been scolded a bit more. He needed a bit more. Probably more. Like maybe some silent treatment. But I think there's also the conflict that was brewing in the background that kind of needed their attention, and they had to band together. So I think there's also that.

[00:39:57] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:39:58] **Sumaiyya** And, you know, like, in a way, it's so interesting to see the complex role that the grandmother plays. And I know we're going into a longer discussion here. But quickly, I want to say that I think it's fascinating. We have a character here, you know, the grandmother, who is quite a horrible, nasty person. Like, she's a witch who is exploiting people and making their lives miserable only to swoop in with a solution. And she's exploiting Pink. But Suraya, her granddaughter, is not like that at all. Like, she is so different. So, you know, it just says that your forefathers or your grandparents might be the worst people, but it doesn't mean that you are also like that. And I think that's also like a silent message for kids that's also really important is that, you know, you might have people in your family that are not the best persons to be around, but you don't have to be like that. You can have your own, you know, you can be good even if they're not. Does that make sense?

[00:40:58] **Kendra** Yeah. And, you know, it goes in the complex idea that, you know, Suraya needed to forgive her mother for being distant. And her mother needed to forgive her mother for the stuff that she had done. And it was like that, you know, cycle of, you know. . . .

[00:41:13] **Sumaiyya** Broken mothers and broken daughters.

[00:41:15] **Kendra** Yeah, exactly.

[00:41:17] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. A beautiful book. Honestly, I want everyone to read it.

[00:41:21] **Kendra** And the cover is gorgeous. I just. . . . It's one I want to frame. And so obviously we adored this book. So we could go on forever but would recommend that you go and read *THE GIRL AND THE GHOST* by Hanna Alkaf. And that is out from Harper in the US. But it's also in other countries as well. So definitely go check that out. All right. So we read so many books, we thought we would recommend a few extra bonus ones. So what do you have on your further reading list, Sumaiyya?

[00:41:56] **Sumaiyya** So many books and I'm going to. . . . I have so many books! And I'm going to try not mentioning all of them. But honestly, like, okay, let me start with a couple of retellings. I adored *MORE TO THE STORY* by Hena Khan, and this is a retelling of *LITTLE WOMEN*. And, you know, if you read *LITTLE WOMEN*, you know that there are certain issues with that book that you as a reader would want to fix. And this book does it, but in such a beautiful way. And in *MORE TO THE STORY*, we have our protagonist, Jamila Mirza, who wants to be an award-winning journalist like her grandfather. Her dad is also in journalism. So it's all . . . it's all really fascinating because she's dedicated and has these ambitions. And it's really about her figuring her path out. And, you know, there's this young boy who kind of joins their community and school. So there's a lot happening there. There's a lot happening with her sisters. It's really fun. It's really well done. So that's a book that I would recommend is *MORE TO THE STORY* by Hena Khan, which is a Muslim American retelling of *LITTLE WOMEN*.

[00:43:07] **Sumaiyya** And the second retelling that I want to recommend is *RUMAYSA*, a fairytale by Radiya Hafiza. And this is a retelling of Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella, all in one. But it's kind of headed by Rumaysa, who is a representation of Rapunzel. And it's really adorable. It's so full of adventure. And it flips the expected gender roles that you see in fairytales. So it was really lovely to read as well and definitely a fun book for kids. This is actually coming out in April, so I think it should be out by the time this episode airs. So, yeah, definitely check this out as well. What about you, Kendra?

[00:43:51] **Kendra** So my first reading is a book that basically is Sumaiyya and I writing a book together. And I know I've said that before. But this is like super on the nose, right? So this is SAME SUN HERE by Silas House and Neila Vaswani. And it's about. . . . It's an epistolary, middle grade novel, where a young girl who's recently come over from India to join her family in America—she's been in the US, I think, like, three years or something—and so she is writing a boy in eastern Kentucky, which is part of Appalachia. And he's writing her back. And so they both discuss. . . . You know, they have a pen pal thing through their school.

[00:44:35] **Kendra** And what I really love about this is that on the audiobook, the authors actually read the sections that they wrote, which were the letters from the kids. So it sounds like two distinct voices because they're actually two distinct writers. And Silas House is a huge favorite of mine. And he is an Appalachian treasure. You'd think that how could these two things pair together? But they both find that they have a lot more in common than they realized. And they tackle difficult topics like River, in the book, he is most likely gay. But they're very young, and so they haven't really talked about that. And there's a lot of tension between the two because River doesn't respond well. And it's this whole thing that tackles really big topics like mountaintop removal, immigration. You know, there's a lot of stuff going on. And I loved it, loved it, loved it, loved it. The audiobook is on Scribd. Would recommend.

[00:45:34] **Sumaiyya** Wow, that sounds like a Kendra and Sumaiyya book. You weren't wrong. Like, honestly, I need that. Thankfully, I have the audiobook. Would you recommend listening to just the audio if I don't have print?

[00:45:48] **Kendra** Oh yeah. I think you could definitely do that. It's basically letters. So like.

[00:45:53] **Sumaiyya** Oh!

[00:45:54] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:45:55] **Sumaiyya** Nice.

[00:45:55] **Kendra** So it's almost like you're listening to monologues, which is really well done. And also the accents are perfect. And I think when you hear Silas House's eastern Kentucky dialect, you will be like, "Oh." And I feel like you will understand where I come from a bit more. And it just captures the spirit of the characters so well because they're like miniature versions of the others. Kind of. Sort of. I also want to quickly recommend—short, very briefly—CITY OF GHOSTS by Victoria Schwab. It's the Cassidy Blake series. I read two books about ghosts for this theme. But I also really love the Cassidy Blake series, which I believe, Sumaiyya, you also really enjoyed.

[00:46:42] **Sumaiyya** Yes. Can't wait to read the third one.

[00:46:45] **Kendra** Yes. Which just came out. Which is like BRIDGE OF SOULS or something. I will link it in the show notes. But if you want more ghost stories, those are great ones. And I listened to the audiobook on Hoopla. And the books are out from Scholastic.

[00:47:00] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, everyone needs to read Victoria Schwab's CITY OF GHOSTS series. I am so in love with them. I listened to the audiobooks. And they are just a delight. And yeah, I actually quickly want to recommend one more book because I can't help it. And this is AMAL UNBOUND by Aisha Saeed. I'm not going to take too long to talk about it. But basically, it's this really beautiful, beautiful story about this young girl who wants to become a teacher. But due to some random accident, she becomes an indentured servant at an estate. And I'm quickly going to read this a couple of sentences that Aisha Saeed has written about her character. And she says, "Amal is a fictional character, but she represents countless other girls in Pakistan and around the world who take a stand against inequality and fight for justice in often unrecognized but important ways. We don't have to make headlines to help change the world for the better. Everything we do in our communities and beyond to impart good is important and matters." So that's AMAL UNBOUND by Aisha Saeed. I loved it so much. I read it in practically one sitting. It was such an addictive read. Really beautiful.

[00:48:15] **Kendra** I really love it. And it me—I'd never read Aisha Saeed before—so it made me really want to go pick up her other work. And it's also a big favorite of RuthAnn's as well. So you have like three Reading Women who have a stamp of approval. We need our own stickers, you know? Like Sumaiyya sticker. Kendra sticker. Sachi sticker. Like, it would be great. For now, that's it from us talking about Middle Grade Magic titles. And yes, Sumaiyya, where can people find more middle grade reads from you about the internet?

[00:48:47] **Sumaiyya** So I am mostly on Bookstagram, which is, you know, Instagram for books (@sumaiyya.books). And on Twitter (@sumaiyyabooks). And I've recently joined Clubhouse and started a book club over there. It's called Books with Sumaiyya. So join me over there to discuss all things literature twice a week. What about you, Kendra?

[00:49:10] **Kendra** I'm on all the social medias (@kdwinchester). And that's my username across the board. So if there's a social media, that's probably where you could find them under that username. That's our show. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced and edited by me, Kendra Winchester with wonderful theme music by Miki Saito with Isaac Greene.

[00:49:39] **Sumaiyya** Join us next time when Kendra and Sachi talk about books by Pacific Islanders. In the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thank you so much for listening.